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Overcoming Tradition and Modernity: The Search for Islamic Authenticity, by Robert D. Lee

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and a little more than nine pages (203–12) to a discussion of the textual history of the *Tafsīr*, including the list of twenty-seven manuscripts “known to be extant.” Unfortunately, the list omits one of the earliest known manuscripts—Bibliothèque Nationale, Arabe 6962, dated Ṣūfī-Ābād 895 A.H.—which is easily available and was used by, among others, Paul Nwyia in his edition of Simnani’s introduction to the *Tafsīr* in *Al-Abḥāth* 26 (1973–77): 141–57. As for the discussion of textual history, one wonders why Elias keeps ignoring the evidence first adduced by Corbin in *Sayyed Haydar Amoli: La philosophie shiʿite* (Tehran/Paris, 1969, pp. 48–52), which leads to the conclusion that Simnani continued the *Tafsīr* written from the beginning by Najm Rāzī, not Najm Kubrā—namely, Simnani’s own statement to this effect in the text of the *Tafsīr* itself (ad Sura 54, M.S. B.N. Arabe 6962, 45a; MS. Beyazit 536, 13a). Surely this passage is also found in the manuscript used by Elias. For further evidence, see also William Shpall, “A Note on Najm al-Dīn al-Rāzī and the *Baḥr al-ḥaqāʾiq*,” *Folia Orientalia* 22 (1981–84): 69–80.

These strictures should not detract from the intrinsic value of this timely monograph. It is, on the whole, a very useful contribution to Simnani studies.

ROBERT D. LEE, *Overcoming Tradition and Modernity: The Search for Islamic Authenticity* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997). Pp. 224. \$62.00 cloth, \$18.00 paper.

REVIEWED BY SHAHROUGH AKHAVI, Department of Government and International Studies, University of South Carolina, Columbia

Robert Lee, professor of political science at Colorado College, has written an engaging study based on twenty years’ serious reflection. He maintains that there is something called “authenticity” and that it can be identified in terms of both theory and practice. It inheres in all civilizations, but its European roots are his preferred starting point, from the Greeks through St. Augustine, Machiavelli, Descartes, Pascal, Locke, and Montesquieu. The debate over authenticity seems to have quickened with Rousseau, followed by Kant, Herder, Schiller, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Gramsci, Heidegger, and Sartre. In addition to these philosophers are a brace of contemporary Western scholars writing in the past three decades, including but not limited to Theodor Adorno, Lionel Trilling, Marshall Berman, and Charles Taylor. In the Third World, authenticity is initially mostly associated with such African(ist)s as Fanon, Césaire, Senghor, and Nyerere. In the Islamic world, where Lee believes authenticity discourse is monopolized by the radical Islamists, the Iranian Revolution hastened an already developing movement on its behalf. “Authenticists” in any civilization are out of the mainstream of intellectual developments, Lee believes, but theirs are the most compelling perspectives. This is as much due to the failings of false dichotomies (tradition and modernity, for one) as it is to its own positive aspects.

Reading between the lines, it seems that it is perhaps easier to say what authenticity is *not* than to articulate its features. It opposes the embracing of universals and is uncomfortable with non-relativistic perspectives. Despite this, it somehow insists on certain commonalities of human experience and is opposed to unmitigated subjectivism. As Lee elaborates the subject, it helps to view authenticity from at least two levels—the individual and the social. “Individual authenticity means that I as a person should be who I am and not someone else” (p. 1). At the communal level, it means that “societies must collectively set agendas that reflect . . . the cultural heritage of their own peoples” (p. 1). Its advocates “reject Cartesian rationality” and instead uphold “the existence of a mystical human bond deep beneath the surface of things” (p. 2). Champions of authenticity do not reject modernity, nor do they wish to restore a vanished traditional society; instead, they strive to channel the process of change

in such a way that it is “comprehensible” and “productive of lifestyles people would recognize as spiritually as well as materially satisfying” (p. 7). They want “to break with essentialist notions of truth” but are unwilling “to part with the notion of truth altogether” (p. 13).

While some authenticists have advanced arguments within a religious frame, others have retained an areligious outlook. All “authenticists” agree that “to be regarded as authentic, action must reflect not universal moral judgments but individual choice within concrete circumstances” (p. 14). Hence, they start from a notion of the self as unique and enmeshed in particular circumstances. They believe that humans are diverse in their achievements, yet united somehow by an underlying common bond. It is what humans *do* that is crucial—they make their history and their world. Authenticists dismiss the dichotomies of tradition and modernity—tradition because it undermines the reality that human beings make choices; modernity because of the banality of secular rationalism with which it is so closely identified. Finally, they believe that rampant individualism, subjectivism, and relativism can be avoided by the fact that individuals make choices within specific circumstances—as Taylor puts it, “in dialogue with other human beings” (p. 17).

These notions are fleshed out in two introductory chapters, titled “The Concept of Authenticity” and “Authenticity in European Thought.” The book’s core consists of individual chapters on four Muslim thinkers whom Lee believes are exemplary authenticists: Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), ‘Ali Shari‘ati (d. 1977), and Mohammad Arkoun (b. 1928). Not surprisingly, at least in this reviewer’s opinion, Lee is most successful with Iqbal and Arkoun (both of whom were and are deeply steeped in European philosophy and social science). The discussion on Shari‘ati is also apposite, although his knowledge of Western social theory and philosophy was quite superficial, and his theory of change a gerry-built construct that borrows too facilely from Western sociology without examining its underlying structures of explanation. The treatment of Qutb, in my view, is less successful. Still, open-minded observers will find much that is persuasive in Lee’s arguments about the social thought of all of these writers.

Some readers of this journal may wonder at juxtapositions such as Kierkegaard and Iqbal, Nietzsche and Shari‘ati, Parsons and Qutb. But Lee’s purpose is to show what makes his Muslim thinkers authenticists, and no doubt Western writers have done much to elaborate authenticity’s central concepts—namely, “particularity,” “radicalism,” “autonomy,” “unicity,” “equality,” and “institutionalization.” Lee is respectful of these thinkers’ ideas while still asking probing questions. Perhaps the one major question under which all his others may be subsumed is: “how do you four thinkers propose to realize your project?” In Lee’s opinion, institutionalization is the most nettlesome issue for them all. In developing his categories and assessing how Iqbal, Qutb, Shari‘ati and Arkoun measure up, Lee takes us into difficult terrain, but we are rewarded by his interesting insights and cogent ways of examining a large number of complex issues.

Lee does well to start with Iqbal, who was known for insisting upon knowledge of the self as a preliminary to knowledge about the world. Iqbal’s impatience with mere imitation of tradition (*taqlid*) and his rejection of Westernization make him a prime candidate for Lee’s analysis. The self-realization of the individual, for Iqbal, was the requisite for the regeneration of human beings everywhere, and, to him, the genius of the Prophet’s *ummah* was its creative solution to the problems of the 7th century. It is this spirit, rather than that era, that needs to be recaptured. For this reason, Iqbal, says Lee, was a revolutionary, a characterization that is reinforced by Iqbal’s willingness to entertain violence as a means to break through to the kind of society that would provide full liberty to Muslims.

As noted earlier, I disagree with Lee on Qutb. In my view, Qutb is a scripturalist who made ad hoc and episodic references to human beings making their history and to the need to adapt their beliefs to changing circumstances. Lee refers mainly to Qutb’s *This Religion of Islam*

(originally published in 1962) to uphold the idea that Qutb believed that the individual is an autonomous actor. However, in terms of Qutb's theory of society as derived from the overall thrust of his oeuvre, I believe that his unit of analysis, the motor force of history, is not the individual but Islam, an entity that he repeatedly presents as a reified entity (not unlike Hegel's "Geist"). For all Qutb's references to Islam as a practical religion (by which he means people should practice it, not just think about it), I am convinced that it is not *homo faber* (man the maker) who lies at the center of his theory, but Allah, "Who knows and you do not know." Lee relies on William Shepard's article in *Die Welt des Islams* (1992), "The Development of the Thought of Sayyid Qutb," to justify the notion that Qutb focused on the individual in history. In my opinion, though, this begs the question. Indeed, by regarding Muslims to have been living in a state of *jāhiliyyah* for so many centuries since the 7th century, Qutb in effect advocates a restoration of Medinan Islam. Those who believe that this was not what Qutb held ought to show how, then, it can be that generation after generation of Muslims over the long centuries failed to get it right, as Qutb sees it; yet, supposedly in the face of their repeated failures, all he requires them to do to finally become "valid" Muslims is reach into the recesses of their spirituality and live their Islam correctly. In my view, Qutb's message is that it is precisely Muslims living in historical time and attempting to actuate their beliefs who have failed to be true to their faiths. What they must do, accordingly, is transcend history and be swept up into an immemorial hypostatization—an Islam of which Qutb is the gatekeeper. Qutb may have made ad hoc references to historical stages, but when one reconstructs his theory, real history appears to have stopped at 661 A.D. (with a possible resuscitation between 717 and 720—the brief caliphate of ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAziz). Lee says at one point:

Qutb thought in terms of stages of realization. The revelations received in Mecca entreated Muhammad and his followers to reconsider their relationship to the universe; at a second stage, in Medina, God pushed them to organize a community . . . [which] achieved enormous successes, before monarchy replaced divine sovereignty. The monarchical phase [i.e., after 661 A.D.], emergent from the early successes, produced decadence but also pointed the way toward revival [p. 96].

Whether Qutb truly believed that the phase since 661 has "pointed the way toward revival" is moot. In any case, it certainly has not brought Muslims into line with the teachings of their God, in Qutb's opinion. In fact, Qutb fully believed that the centuries-long "monarchical phase," rather than producing a revival, has generated *jāhiliyyah*.

Lee's discussion of Arkoun is one of the great strengths of this book. Arkoun is a Berber who is emeritus professor of Islamic thought and former director of the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the Sorbonne (III). He also writes in French and is a chevalier of the Legion of Honor. Lee has, in fact, at Arkoun's own request, translated into English Arkoun's book *Overtures sur l'Islam* (1989, 1992) under the title, *Rethinking Islam* (1994).

Arkoun, influenced by Foucault and other post-modernists, demands the historicization of Islamic thought—to show that it is the product of people in actual historical times and places. The problem is that a particular version of Islamic thought has been sanctified as a consequence of developments in the late classical period, and especially due to the influence of al-Shafiʿi (d. 820). Ever since, Muslims have been prisoners of categories of meaning standardized centuries ago, whereas the genius of the early Muslims was that they themselves were able to adapt to changing historical circumstances by interpretations that differed from those held by their predecessors. Another difficulty is that Shafiʿian and Ashʿarite epistemologies are entrenched because of the cooperation among political regimes, establishment ulama, and dissident clerics/populists, all of whom fear that abandoning the ahistorical approach to knowledge will lead to their marginalization in society. Yet, without the careful application of critical methodologies from modern philosophy, social science, and linguistics, Muslims will always

have to gravitate within the orbit of a closed cognitive system that is increasingly irrelevant to their contemporary needs. If this sounds a lot like Muhammad ʿAbduh's efforts on behalf of *ijtihād*, that is because Arkoun writes within the tradition identified with that reformer. Arkoun's opponents, such as the Egyptian Muslim Brother Muhammad al-Ghazzali, with whom he had a public debate, cannot easily dismiss him as a Westernizer because Arkoun has himself criticized Western Orientalism and also because he is a scholar who has solid grounding in Islamic studies, including a substantial study of al-Miskawayh (d. 1030).

Lee writes that Arkoun conceives of the Qurʾan at a variety of levels: "(1) a set of revelations . . . ; (2) a diverging set of recitations in the newly emergent Arab Empire; (3) a written text developed in an effort to reduce diversity and solidify Arab rule; (4) a foundation for a corpus of codified law designed to unify the judicial practice of a multiethnic, multilingual empire; and (5) a reflection of universal truth as revealed to the Arabs" (p. 148). He laments that it is the last two levels of understanding that have dominated and produced a hegemonic *fiqh* today. Let us think the unthinkable (*l'impensable*), says Arkoun, by which he means let us stop thinking in terms of unchanging substances and essences; let us abandon the glorification of idealism, with its timeless categories such as truth and beauty and reason. Such glorification has given the Muslims a *kalām* that is overwhelmed with considerations of Allah's attributes, whereas Muslims are in need of a cognitive system that will allow them to live in the world as fully liberated believers in *tawhid*.

But Arkoun cannot square the circle—his reliance on science as the way out of the authenticist's dilemma is finally unconvincing to Lee. Arkoun believes science can reveal the diversities and multiplicities of human existence, beliefs, and thought. How can it do so? Through the "constantly revised principles and methods of objective knowledge" (p. 163). Yet how is one to know whether one is making progress or, indeed, retrogressing, queries Lee, if there is no permanent standard by which to judge? Not only this, but Arkoun is too utopian in expecting intellectuals to do the heavy-duty work of reconstructing Islam and then persuade the masses to accept their final product.

In fact, the thought of all four Muslim thinkers has shown the "Elusiveness of Authenticity," as Lee titles his concluding chapter. The desire for authenticity is a desire for new foundations, but how does one know when one has created them? As Lee puts it, "the search for authenticity ultimately founders on this point of validation, which Islam cannot provide. Islam cannot validate a particular reading of Islam" (p. 194). Philosophy is a way out, though these writers are suspicious of a rationally driven philosophy. Meanwhile, there are many Islams, and significant gaps among the world's cultures exist. The problems in overcoming such gaps are great, but in the interim we should thank Lee for his important efforts to elucidate many of the key issues.

DAN COHN-SHERBOK, *Medieval Jewish Philosophy: An Introduction* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1996). Pp. 205.

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Introductions, whether in the form of books or academic courses, typically lie at one of two extremes. Either they offer a merely superficial survey of the subject, or they make the kind of incisive statement that can be made only by those few who have mastered many aspects of a subject and are hence able to grasp and convey its principles. In the case of academic courses, the extremes are manifested in the persons of those chosen to teach them. Some uni-